RICH AND POOR

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Book excerpt: With Liberty and Justice for Some

How Ford's treatment of Nixon launched a new era of elite immunity -- and pervasive, limitless corruption

By Glenn Greenwald

(Credit: Wikipedia)

Following is an excerpt from Glenn Greenwald’s new book, *With Liberty and Justice for Some: How Law is Used to Destroy Equality and Protect the Powerful*; this is from the section of the book examining how the Ford pardon of Nixon entrenched the corrupt precepts of modern elite immunity:

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As multiple episodes demonstrate, a belief that elite immunity is both necessary and justified became
the prevailing ethos in the nation’s most influential circles. In countless instances over recent years, prominent political and media figures have insisted that serious crimes by the most powerful should be overlooked—either in the name of the common good, or in the name of a warped conception of fairness according to which those with the greatest power are the most entitled to deference and understanding.

This is what makes the contemporary form of American lawlessness new and unprecedented. It is now perfectly common, and perfectly acceptable, to openly advocate elite immunity. And this advocacy has had its intended effect: the United States has become a nation that does not apply the rule of law to its elite class, which is another way of saying that the United States does not apply the rule of law. . . .

If the threat of real punishment for criminality is removed, for many rational people there will be little incentive to abide by the law and much incentive to break it. Alexander Hamilton, in *Federalist 15*, explained why.

It is essential to the idea of a law, that it be attended with a sanction; or, in other words, a penalty or punishment for disobedience. If there be no penalty annexed to disobedience, the resolutions or commands which pretend to be laws will, in fact, amount to nothing more than advice or recommendation.

For the nation’s most powerful elites, the law has indeed been whittled down to “nothing more than advice or recommendation.” Although there have been episodes of unpunished elite malfeasance throughout American history, the *explicit*, systematic embrace of the notion that such malfeasance should be shielded from legal consequences begins with the Watergate scandal—one of the clearest cases of widespread, deliberate criminality at the highest level of the U.S. government.

By the scandal’s conclusion, few contested that not only Nixon’s top aides but Nixon himself had committed serious felonies—either in authorizing the break-in and related illegalities, or in obstructing the ensuing investigation. Nonetheless, Nixon was ultimately shielded from all legal consequences thanks to the pardon granted by his handpicked vice president, Gerald Ford—who, it was widely believed, secured his appointment by agreeing to protect Nixon from prosecution.

Ford first explained his decision to pardon Nixon in a speech to the nation on September 8, 1974. The new president began by paying lip service to the rule of law: “I deeply believe in equal justice for all Americans, what ever their station or former station. The law, whether human or divine, is no respecter of persons; but”—and here he tacked on a newly concocted amendment designed to gut that phrase’s meaning—“the law is a respecter of reality.” Ford then proceeded to recite what have by now become the standard clichés our political class uses to justify immunity. Watergate, he intoned, is an American tragedy in which we all have played a part. It could go on and on and on, or someone must write the end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that, and if I can, I must. . . .

The facts, as I see them, are that a former President of the United States, instead of enjoying equal treatment with any other citizen accused of violating the law, would be cruelly and excessively penalized either in preserving the presumption of his innocence or in obtaining a speedy determination of his guilt in order to repay a legal debt to society.

During this long period of delay and potential litigation, ugly passions would again be aroused. And our people would again be polarized in their opinions. And the credibility of our free institutions of government would again be challenged at home and abroad. . . .

My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed. My conscience tells me that only I, as President, have the constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book. My conscience tells me it is my duty, not merely to proclaim
domestic tranquility but to use every means that I have to insure it.

Remarkably, Ford explicitly pointed to Nixon’s lofty status as a reason to exempt him from the accountability applied to ordinary Americans—a complete reversal and rejection of the central covenant of the American founding. Ford’s signature line—“Our long national nightmare is over”—put a heroic spin on the betrayal of the rule of law: we end the “nightmare” of high-level criminality by sweeping it under the rug, protecting the wrongdoers, and pretending their crimes never happened.

Upon Ford’s death in December 2006, prominent figures rushed forth to consecrate his pardon of Nixon as an act of great nobility, magnanimity, and self-sacrifice, and thus to glorify its underlying premises. Leading the charge, not surprisingly, was Dick Cheney, Ford’s former chief of staff and the then-vice president. By 2006, Cheney himself had been accused of involvement in a wide variety of illegal acts, from establishing a worldwide torture regime and spying on Americans without warrants to outing a covert CIA agent and obstructing the resulting investigation.

Cheney’s own interests were thus clearly served by exploiting Ford’s death to bolster the propagandistic notion that elite immunity is dispensed not for the benefit of the powerful but rather in patriotic service of the common good. At Ford’s funeral, Cheney eulogized his former boss by heralding the pardon as an act of national salvation.

In fairness to Dick Cheney, we heard the same message from others, almost note for note. The Washington Post’s David Broder—the so-called dean of the Washington press corps—spoke for many journalists, past and present, when asked what would have happened had Nixon not been immunized.

My guess is that there would have been strong public pressure for prosecution of Richard Nixon, since several of his White House associates were already facing criminal charges. A lengthy trial would have been a difficult ordeal for the country, something President Ford wanted to spare Americans.

The actual beneficiary of the pardon, of course, was not “Americans” but Richard Nixon. Thanks to Ford’s act, Nixon himself was shielded from the kind of punishment that, as a “law-and-order” Republican, he had devoted his career to imposing on ordinary Americans when they broke the law, no matter how petty the offense. Yet this grant of immunity to the nation’s most powerful figure was endlessly cast as a generous gift to the American public, which—we were repeatedly told—had been spared the agony, acrimony, and shame of seeing their leader held accountable for his crimes as any other citizen would be.

The Nixon pardon, and the way it was sold to the country, became the template for justifying elite immunity. Nowadays, with only rare exceptions, each time top members of the nation’s political class are caught committing a crime, the same reasons are hauled out to get them off the hook. Prosecuting public officials mires us in a “divisive” past when we should be looking forward. It is wrong to “criminalize policy disputes”—meaning crimes committed with the use of political power. Political elites who commit crimes in carrying out their duties are “well-intentioned” and so do not deserve to be treated as if they were common criminals; moreover, politicians who are forced out of office and have their reputations damaged already “suffer enough.” To prosecute them would only engender a cycle of retribution. Political harmony thus trumps the need to enforce the rule of law.

Of course, all criminal prosecutions are, by definition, exercises in looking to the past rather than the future. All prosecutions impose substantial burdens on the accused, cost enormous amounts of time and money to resolve, and are plagued by numerous imperfections. The nation always faces pressing challenges and urgent problems from which headline-grabbing prosecutions will distract attention. All individuals accused of serious crimes suffer in multiple ways long before—and completely independent of—any actual punishment. And while it is true that criminal proceedings involving politicians who commit crimes in office inevitably engender partisan divisions and undermine political harmony, citing
these circumstances as just cause for legal immunity is, by definition, creating a license to break the law.

That dynamic expresses the underlying motive of the political and media classes’ general defense of elite immunity: by protecting the lawbreaking license for other powerful individuals, they strengthen a custom of which they might avail themselves if they too break the law and get caught. It is class-based, self-interested advocacy. That is why belief in this prerogative and the devotion to protecting it transcend political ideology, partisan affiliation, the supposed wall between political and media figures, and every other pretense of division within elite classes. It is in the interest of every member of the privileged political and financial class, regardless of role or position, to maintain the vitality of this immunity. And what we have seen over the last decade is the inevitable by-product of elite immunity: pervasive, limitless elite corruption and criminality.

For more on the book, see here. Continue Reading


- Brings together for the first time facts and figures showing exactly what "the 99% and the 1%" divide means in the real world and the damage it causes
- Identifies the social and historical forces that created and perpetuate this divide
- Offers concrete proposals for closing the inequality gap
- Click here for the press release

For over thirty years, we’ve lived through a radical redistribution of wealth—upward, to a tiny fraction of the population. It’s as though we’re undertaking a bizarre social experiment to see how much inequality a democratic society can tolerate.

As a result "We are the 99%," the rallying cry of the Occupy movement, has spread far beyond its ranks. But who are the 99 percent? Who are the 1 percent? How extensive and systematic is inequality throughout society? What are its true causes and consequences? How is inequality changing our world? And what can be done about it?

For many years, Chuck Collins has been a leading voice and activist on these questions. In this book he marshals wide-ranging data from a variety of sources to paint a graphic picture of how disparities in wealth and power play out in America and the world. For the first time, this book reveals the concrete meaning of "the 99% and the 1%," looking not just at individual households but at the business world, the media, and the earth as a whole.

Collins identifies the shifts in social values, political power, and economic policy that have led to our current era of extreme inequality—particularly the way Wall Street has managed to rig the rules of the game in favor of the 1 percent—and surveys the havoc inequality has wreaked on virtually every aspect of society. But there is hope. Not only does he offer common-sense proposals for closing the inequality gap, but Collins provides a guide to many of the groups—including some made up of millionaires—that are working to bring about a society that works for everybody: for the 100 percent. This is a struggle that can be won. After all, the odd are 99 to 1 in our favor.
With JUSTICE FOR SOME is JUSTICE FOR NONE….Justice In America: A Tale Of Two Crimes
http://www.commondreams.org/further/2011/06/24-8

Justice In America: A Tale Of Two Crimes by Abby Zimet
Consider Paul Allen, 55, a former mortgage CEO who defrauded lenders of over $3 billion. This week, prosecutors celebrated the fact they got him a 40-month prison sentence. Consider Roy Brown, 54, a hungry homeless man who robbed a Louisiana bank of $100 - the teller gave him more but he handed the rest back. He felt bad the next day and surrendered to police. He got 15 years. Justice in America has a ways to go.

RESISTANCE

RICH

BOOKS

The World's Super-Rich Have Stashed $21 Trillion in Offshore Accounts
By Nick Mathiason, Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 26 July 12, RSN

Investigative economist James Henry exhaustively trawled through financial information held by the IMF, World Bank, Bank for International Settlements, central banks and national treasuries to come up with the most definitive report ever written on the super-rich and offshore wealth.

Henry’s Price of Offshore Revisted report, commissioned by Tax Justice Network, shows:

- between $21 trillion and $32 trillion of financial assets is owned by High Net Worth Individuals in tax havens. This does not include real estate, art or jewels.

- a conservative 3% return on that $21tn taxed at 30% would generate $189bn – a figure easily eclipsing what OECD industrialised nations spend on overseas development aid.

- the top 50 private banks collectively managed more than $12.1tn in cross-border invested assets for
private clients, including their trusts. This is up from $5.4tn in 2005.

- fewer than 10 million members of the global super-rich have amassed a $21tn offshore fortune. Of these, less than 100,000 people worldwide own $9.8tn of wealth held offshore.

Accompanying the Price of Offshore Revisited is a separate paper (which I co-wrote). It reveals that data used by individual countries to assess the gap between rich and poor is inaccurate. And as a result, inequality is far more extreme than policymakers realise.

This is because economists calculating inequality fail to include the vast majority of offshore cash in their findings. So the wealthy are far better off than the studies suggest.

In *Inequality: you don’t know the half of it*, eight of the world’s leading economists were asked whether offshore wealth was largely excluded from inequality studies. Ranging from the World Bank’s acting chief economist to academics at the Paris School of Economics and the Brookings Institute in the US, they all confirmed this was the case.

This is because the wealthy do not disclose their true incomes. They also rarely participate in surveys. Academics do compensate for non-participation but they admit, official data vastly underestimates the true picture.

**Trickle Up**

Combined, the two papers published by TJN end any notion that trickle down economics – the Thatcher/Reagan doctrine that suggests tax breaks for the rich benefits all society – works.

We already know that in the US between 1980 and 2010, incomes of the top 1% doubled and the top 0.1% tripled while the bottom 90% saw their incomes fall 5%. But the TJN studies show this wealth disparity would be statistically even worse if offshore cash is included in official studies.

Perhaps most tellingly, the reports bring into sharp focus how global banks – so-called ‘pirate banks’ – have enabled the super-rich to avoid unimaginable sums of tax while at the same time enjoying taxpayers cash through government bank bailouts. A true double whammy of dark proportions.

Some of these banks have been labelled ‘too big to fail’ following the financial crisis. But after the Libor scandal, HSBC’s key role in laundering Mexican drug cash and the subprime bank disaster, there is compelling evidence to suggest they are also ‘too big to be true’.

Which brings us to an issue that is fast troubling global financial regulators: the so-called ‘London disease’. It has not gone unnoticed that many of the financial scandals in recent years have a Square Mile connection. Never mind Libor, it was the London offices of AIG, Lehman Brothers and Bernie Madoff that helped destroy them. The JP Morgan and UBS rogue traders who lost billions were both
London based.

The UK is also arguably the centre of the offshore world. It is one of the biggest private bank centres and Britain’s non-domicile tax rules allow the global super-rich to legally avoid taxes on their overseas income while residing here. In addition, many of the UK’s overseas territories and crown dependencies such as Jersey, Isle of Man, the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands are major offshore centres. This perhaps explains why the British government, for all its rhetoric, has failed to clamp down on the shadow financial system.

It has taken the painstaking work of TJN’s Henry to bring to light the true price of offshore. That the IMF, World Bank or OECD has not done this work is troubling especially as their lack of effective oversight contributed to the economic crisis that has caused significant hardship for hundreds of millions of people.

A good way to atone is to start deploying their thousands of economists to implement measures that will introduce transparency to the financial system instead of policies that facilitate secret offshore hoarding by

This article appeared in the 22 July 2007 issue of the London Guardian. 
It's about the world of the increasing number of rich and super-rich. 
If you think you know what self-indulgence means, think again! -Carl

http://observer.guardian.co.uk/world/story/0,,2131974,00.html

Welcome to Richistan, USA
The American Dream of riches for all is turning into a nightmare of inequality. But a backlash is brewing, reports Paul Harris in New York

- Email
- Paul Harris in New York
- The Observer, Saturday 21 July 2007

On the surface, Mark Cain works for a time-share company. Members pay a one-off sum to join and an annual fee. They then get to book holiday time in various destinations around the globe. But Solstice clients are not ordinary people. They are America’s super-rich and a brief glance at its operations reveal the vast and still widening gulf between them and the rest of America.

Solstice has only about 80 members. Platinum membership costs them $875,000 to join and then a $42,000 annual fee. In return they get access to 10 homes from London to California and a private yacht in the Caribbean, all fully staffed with cooks, cleaners and 'lifestyle managers' ready to satisfy any whim from helicopter-skiing to audiences with local celebrities. As the firm's marketing manager, Cain knows what Solstice's clientele want. 'We are trying to feed and manage this insatiable appetite for
luxury,' Cain said with pride.

America's super-rich have returned to the days of the Roaring Twenties. As the rest of the country struggles to get by, a huge bubble of multi-millionaires lives almost in a parallel world. The rich now live in their own world of private education, private health care and gated mansions. They have their own schools and their own banks. They even travel apart - creating a booming industry of private jets and yachts. Their world now has a name, thanks to a new book by Wall Street Journal reporter Robert Frank which has dubbed it 'Richistan'. There every dream can come true. But for the American Dream itself - which promises everyone can join the elite - the emergence of Richistan is a mixed blessing. 'We in America are heading towards 'developing nation' levels of inequality. We would become like Brazil. What does that say about us? What does that say about America?' Frank said.

In 1985 there were just 13 US billionaires. Now there are more than 1,000. In 2005 the US saw 227,000 new millionaires being created. One survey showed that the wealth of all US millionaires was $30 trillion, more than the GDPs of China, Japan, Brazil, Russia and the EU combined. The rich have now created their own economy for their needs, at a time when the average worker's wage rises will merely match inflation and where 36 million people live below the poverty line. In Richistan sums of money are rendered almost meaningless because of their size. It also has other names. There is the 'Platinum Triangle' used to describe the slice of Beverly Hills where many houses go for above $10m. Then there is the Jewel Coast, used to describe the strip of Madison Avenue in Manhattan where boutique jewellery stories have sprung up to cater for the new riches' needs. Or it exists in the MetCircle society, a Manhattan club open only to those whose net worth is at least $100m.

The reason behind the sudden wealth boom is, according to some experts, the convergence of a new technology - the internet and other computing advances - with fluid and speculative markets. It was the same in the late 19th century when the original Gilded Age of conspicuous wealth and deep poverty was spawned by railways and the industrial age. At the same time government has helped by doling out corporate tax breaks. In the Fifties the proportion of federal income from company taxes was 33 per cent, by 2003 it was just 7.4 percent. Some 82 of America's largest companies paid no tax at all in at least one of the first three years of the administration of President George W Bush.

But who are the new rich? Some of the names are familiar, Microsoft tycoon Bill Gates and savvy stock investor Warren Buffett. But most are unknown, often springing from the secretive world of financial hedge funds. Men like James Simons, who took home compensation of $1.7bn last year. Last year the 25 top earning hedge fund bankers in the US earned an average of $570m each. The average US household income is $50,000.

It is such men - and they are usually men - who feed the outlandish luxury goods economy of Richistan. It is they who are responsible for the rebirth of the butler industry, which was all but dead in the Seventies and is now facing a shortage of trained staff. So keen is the demand that many can expect to earn a six-figure salary when they graduate from booming butler schools.

Then there is the runaway feeder-industry of luxury consumer items. The new ultra rich turn up their noses at Rolexes; the sought-after brand is Franck Muller, which sells a high-end timepiece for $736,000. Or try a Mont Blanc pen, encrusted in jewels, for $700,000. Louis Vuitton's most exclusive handbag sells for $42,000. Only 24 were ever made and none ever touched a shelf as all were pre-sold to Richistani clients.

In places such as Manhattan and Los Angeles, restaurants and bars outdo themselves in excess. New York's Algonquin Hotel has a $10,000 'martini on a rock' (it comes with a diamond at the bottom of the glass). City eateries sell burgers for more than $50. One offers a $1,000 omelette. In Los Angeles there is a craze for Bling mineral water - at $90 a bottle.
Then there are the boats. The private yacht industry in America has been caught in an arms race of size and luxuriousness. So far, there has been a clear winner: Oracle-founder Larry Ellison's 450ft water palace, the Rising Sun. More than 80 rooms on five storeys and a landing craft that carries a Jeep, a basketball court doubling as a helipad and a fully-equipped cinema.

Now an Oregon-based company is taking things further: private submarines. An estimated 100 or so private subs are now drifting around the world's oceans. Then there are the rockets - several notable billionaires are now leading the way in private exploration of space. One of them is Robert Bigelow who has ploughed $500m into trying to build an inflatable space hotel. A miniature prototype model was successfully launched and tested last month. In a scene that perhaps James Bond would find familiar, armed guards now patrol the fences of Bigelow Aerospace's headquarters wearing badges decorated with an alien as their corporate logo.

But this is not just a world of riches gone mad that the rest of America can ignore. The growth of such a large super-rich class, coupled with a deepening poverty in many communities, is starting to tear at the fabric of society. Even some of the most wealthy - like Gates and Buffett - have spoken openly of the needs to address the massive 'inequality gap' that they have come to exemplify. In effect, some of the very richest Americans are calling for themselves to be taxed. In a speech last month Buffett - the third richest man in the world - pointed out that his tax rate was 17.7 per cent of his income while his secretary was taxed at 30 per cent. 'Many of the new super-rich are looking long term at the world and they see a collapsing US education system and health-care system and the disappearance of the middle class and they realise: this is bad for everybody,' said Frank.

Defenders of low tax for the very rich point to the theory of trickledown economics - the spending power of the rich benefiting the poor. But while the super-rich have boomed, the earning power of the average and poor citizen has not nearly matched the performance of the elite. In 2005 the top one per cent of earners in the US gained 14 per cent in income in real terms, while the rest of the country gained less than one per cent. The situation is especially bad for the severely poor - those living at half the poverty level - whose numbers are at a 32-year high. The rich are getting richer but are not bringing everyone else with them. 'If you look at the impact of the last 20 years it seems pretty clear that trickledown just does not work,' said Paul Buchheit, economics professor at Chicago's Harold Washington College.

There are some signs of a change in attitude. Recent huge Wall Street flotations such as the listing of private equity giants like Blackstone have created a push in Congress for taxes on the instant billionaires they have created. Scandals of excess such as Enron and WorldCom and the trial of Conrad Black have been high-profile. But few politicians, needing campaign cash from new millionaires, will get far preaching higher tax. Calls for more equality tend to have come from men like Buffett and Gates whose fortunes are so enormous that a little extra tax would make no difference. Bush has pushed to phase out taxes like the estate tax, which benefit only the rich. 'I don't see it changing. No matter what administration is in power,' said Buchheit.

But many think it must change. To a large degree, the debate over the booming lives of the super-rich is an argument about the American soul. It is a country that has always worshipped wealth, where the creation of a fortune was seen as virtuous and a source of pride.

But now that huge wealth has started to squeeze the 'middle class' out of existence, leaving the haves and have-nots in very separate worlds. It is possible that political will may develop to address the problem or that the problem will correct itself. The notorious end of the Gilded Age came in the panic of 1893 that sank America into depression.

Frank believes the signs of a coming storm are there. 'The trick is to spot when prosperity turns to excess,' he said. 'When a large amount of people make a lot money very quickly it's a sign you are near
the top of the market.' In a world of mega-yachts, private submarines and space hotels, that peak might be close at hand. And it's a long way down.

**Billionaire's row**

- There are 7.5 million households in America worth up to $10m. A further two million are worth $10m-$100m and thousands are worth more than $100m.

- There is now a two-year waiting list for 200ft yachts. If put end to end, the boats on that list, which cost $50m each, would be 15 miles long.

- Sebonack Golf Club in the Hamptons, Long Island, charges $650,000 for membership. That doesn't include the $12,000 annual dues, or tips for caddies.

- Google founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page have a private Boeing 767.

- John D. Rockefeller was America's first billionaire. Adjusted for inflation, he had $14bn - less than the net worth of each of Sam Walton's five children today. There were 13 US billionaires in 1985. Now there are more than 1,000. There are as many millionaires in North Carolina as in India.

- 'Affluent' is Richistani for 'not really rich'. According to Frank, you need about $10m to be considered

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**Who Would Jesus Vote For?**

Rev. Dave Hunter

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville

November 2, 2008

First, let me tell you up front that I’m not going to tell you who Jesus would vote for on Tuesday; you probably didn’t expect me to. The sermon title was meant to get your attention, perhaps to provoke you. And you’re not going to find out who Dave Hunter will vote for. I don’t want to get us in trouble with the Internal Revenue Service.

But I should stop here and say a few words about what I am doing this morning and what’s ahead.

In my years as a Unitarian Universalist lay person, I learned that the sermons I appreciated the least were the political ones, where the preacher would offer his advice for solving the problems of the nation. What makes them think, I would ask myself, that they know anything more about health care, crime prevention, nuclear proliferation, educational policy, or what have you, than I do? How can ministers who have never had a course in economics or law, for example, presume to offer their guidance on issues that cannot be studied without an economic or legal perspective?

On the other hand, as you well know, Tuesday is election day.

What I would like to do, in the next few minutes, is to help you look at politics from a religious perspective. I won’t claim that I’m better informed than any of you about the political choices we face, or that I have any advice with respect to the election that you haven’t thought of for yourself.
Many people, who consider themselves to be Christians, believe that their religion provides a foundation for their politics. And some of these believe that their Christianity supports a confrontational attitude toward the rest of the world and a me-first attitude toward their fellow citizens and future generations.

In response, I would like to explore for a few minutes this morning, the outrageous question, “who would Jesus vote for?” Who would Jesus vote for on November 4, if he were an Arkansas voter?

I raise this question, first, because many people – probably no one in this room, I realize – because many people find this approach a natural way. We need to be able to talk to them in their own language; we need to be able to meet them where they are. I want you to be prepared to talk to friends and neighbors, to co-workers and cousins.

There’s a second reason I raise this question. Those who aided the evolution and birth of the two denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, in Boston and Philadelphia and Baltimore, were Christians. The Unitarians, in particular, were Congregationalists, descendants of the early Puritan settlers. As Unitarian and Trinitarian Congregationalists gradually – and sometimes not so gradually – went off in separate directions, the Unitarians never doubted that the Bible was their book, and they had no intention of giving it up.

While the Bible does not have the authority for us that it did for our spiritual ancestors of two centuries ago, we can find the roots of our view of the world, of our moral principles, in the values of Unitarians and Universalists of that era.

For them it would have made sense to look for moral guidance in the teachings of Jesus and in the Bible generally – though they would not have restricted themselves to these sources. For them it would have made sense to ask, at least rhetorically, how God would judge their behavior, and their nation’s behavior.

I

For whom would Jesus vote? Now I recognize that Jesus lived two thousand years ago, in circumstances very different from ours – neither the Hebrew kingdoms nor the Roman Empire conducted elections – and we don’t actually know a whole lot about Jesus himself. But I am disturbed and mystified by self-proclaimed Christians who support positions and candidates that strike me as completely antithetical to the teachings and example of Jesus.

It is my hope that Unitarian Universalists – whatever their relationship to Christianity – will be able to discuss – knowledgeably discuss – with Christians on the religious and political right, the biblical basis of their social and political views, and ask them some tough questions.

Let’s start with the Jewish background, the Jewish foundation of Christianity. Jesus, don’t forget, and all his contemporary followers, were Jews. They did not repudiate their heritage but sought to reform and purify it.

One of the underlying themes of the Hebrew Bible is concern for the oppressed. Here’s what Moses told his people, as recorded in the 10th chapter of Deuteronomy:
So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,

18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.

19 You also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deut. 10:12, 17-19

Moses reminds the Hebrews that God “is not partial and takes no bribe.” In other words, contrary to what you might expect, God is not partial to the powerful. God does not take bribes. Who can give bribes? Those with money, the wealthy. But Moses explains that the rich will receive no favors from God.

Moses continues: God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow,” and God “loves the strangers” – the foreigners, the aliens in our midst – “providing them food and clothing.” God, according to Moses, looks after those least able to look after themselves; God is on the side of the oppressed.

Then Moses gets to his punch line, what he’s been building up to: “You also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” You, like God, should be compassionate to those in need. You were oppressed once yourselves – remember when you were held in slavery in Egypt – you should treat others as you wish you had been treated.

This God, described by Moses, is not partial to the elite, to the rich, but pays special attention to the widow, the orphan, the stranger. In short, God is on the side of the oppressed, and you should be, too.

I think there is a message here for the leaders of this nation, and for this nation’s voters.

Or consider the prophet Amos, speaking on behalf of God to the idle rich of the Kingdom of Israel, warning them of destruction if they do not redress the injustices of their society: (Amos 6:4-7)

4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall;

It’s not the poor who have “beds of ivory” or have either couches or the leisure to lounge on them. It’s not the poor who could dream of eating a lamb or a calf. The poor cannot afford meat at all, let alone a young animal with a productive future. Amos continues:

5 [Alas for those] who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music;
6 who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

It’s not the poor who have time to “sing idle songs,” who drink wine from bowls rather than cups, or who have the money to buy “the finest oils.” It is the rich who do all these things – but what they do not do, Amos charges, is to “grieve over the ruin of Joseph.” Joseph here is the personification of the whole people, of the Kingdom of Israel. Israel is going to ruin and the rich do not lift a finger to reverse the decline.

7 Therefore [Amos continues,] they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. Amos 6:4-7

The rich, Amos predicts – because they have failed to pay attention to the needs of society in general but have instead mindlessly indulged themselves – the rich will lose their privileged position and be sent off into exile, “and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.”

Again, I think there is a message here for the leaders of this nation, and for this nation’s voters.

These themes of the Hebrew Bible, known to many as the Old Testament, are continued in the New Testament.

Jesus himself welcomed the widow and the orphan and the stranger. Indeed, he would turn no one away: he represents radical hospitality. Thus in the parable of the dinner party (Luke 14:16-24), the host is disappointed that his friends offer excuses rather than coming to dinner, and he instructs his servant to “go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.” (Luke 14:21) In other words, the Kingdom of God – which I prefer to call the realm of peace and justice – is not reserved for persons of privilege: it’s for everybody, and especially for those on the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

Indeed, if anyone is to be left out, it’s the rich, not the poor. Jesus’s view of the rich was blunt: “It is easier,” he said, “for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matt. 19:24, see also Mark 10:25, Luke 18:25)

Jesus would reshape society. He challenged previously unquestioned assumptions. Jesus was opposed to the use of violence; his message was one of generosity and love.

27 ¶ “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.
29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.
30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.
31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Luke 6:27-31

Can we live up to these standards? No, probably not. Would a society based on these ideas be a good place to live, would it be viable? Yes, I think it would be, if properly tempered by realism and experience.
But I do not think that such teachings are guiding – or even influencing – this nation’s leaders today.

I would not claim that it’s easy to put biblical teachings into practice – it never was. The world is a complicated, dangerous place. The Bible is not our only source of wisdom and moral guidance, not by a long shot. But those who claim that in leading this nation they are following Christian principles – and those who would follow such leaders – they need to be challenged.

II

I would like to try to pull this together with some help from John Winthrop. John Winthrop was the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He was, in other words, the leader of the early Puritan settlers in Massachusetts. These Puritans, as I mentioned earlier, are our spiritual ancestors. They became known as the Congregationalists because of the way they organized their congregations. Each congregation made its own decisions. We have inherited their governance structure, their polity. This community, like other Unitarian Universalist congregations, makes its own decisions, and pays its own bills.

While on his ship, the Arabella, in 1630, on the way to Massachusetts, Governor Winthrop wrote: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” [Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, vol. 1, p. 195, quoting Perry Miller, ed., The American Puritans, p. 82]

Winthrop was using an image from the Gospel according to Matthew: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” [Matt. 5:14]

Matthew, in writing this, probably had in mind a passage from the prophet Isaiah:

2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.
3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Isaiah 2:2-4

Here’s the image – the image shared by Winthrop, Matthew, and Isaiah. Imagine a city on a hill, up high, where all can see it – a city where peace and justice flourish – a city that serves as an example to all the nations, a city that inspires the nations to “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;” a city that inspires the nations to live in peace with justice: “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” This city on the hill has been a guiding image for our nation since 1630.

The question that we must ask now as a nation is “Do we still aspire to create the City on a Hill described by John Winthrop?”

The United States is not such a city now. One can reasonably argue, that with all our faults and imperfections, we have never been the City on the Hill. Today we seem to be farther from this ideal than we have ever been in the past, and therefore I feel compelled to raise the question: Do we still
aspire to become the City on a Hill, the city of peace and justice that inspires the nations of the world to “beat their swords into plowshares” and not to “learn war any more?”

I am hopeful that we can build the City on the Hill, that some day ours can be a land of peace and justice, that some day our nation will be seen as the light of the world, providing an example by living by its highest ideals, that some day other nations will look to us and say,

The United States is our inspiration!

The example of the United States gives us hope!

Thank God for the United States!

That is my hope; that is my dream; that is my prayer. Amen.